

Comments to FHWA Docket Number FHWA-2006-23612

Surface Transportation Environment and Planning Cooperative Research Program (STEP)

Scope of Research Program

There is a need for research into planning capacity building and technology transfer. Substantial Federal funding is directed toward “hard research” such as experimental work and materials testing. Further, peer-reviewed academic research into policy alternatives and technological innovation is also well supported. These programs—usually administered through the National Academies of Sciences’ Transportation Research Board—are invaluable to furthering knowledge in the field. However, the area of technology transfer and practitioner capacity-building does not enjoy the financial support that TRB’s programs do.

NARC believes that the STEP program can be an important tool to accomplish the goal of improving the knowledge base of the country’s transportation planning professionals. NARC cautions FHWA to use STEP money on capacity building and technology transfer instead of hard research.

Strategic Planning

When undertaking the strategic plan for STEP implementation, FHWA should include a variety of transportation stakeholders, including national associations. Associations such as NARC interact daily with the end users of capacity building research, and can assist FHWA to identify the changing needs of transportation practitioners. NARC encourages FHWA to list more national associations (including NARC) among the Tier III stakeholders in the Draft National Strategy posted on the STEP website.

Earmarked Research Programs

The STEP program identifies five earmarked research programs (TELUS, TRANSIMS, CEE, Rural Transportation Research, and CTARD) that will receive direct funding from FHWA. NARC believes that the work to be undertaken by these earmarked research programs will be a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge on transportation planning. However, NARC is concerned that the products of their research will not reach as broad an audience as would work administered directly by FHWA. Therefore, NARC urges FHWA to provide a mechanism for these research products to be distributed through FHWA channels and other stakeholder organizations. Further, these earmark recipients should be encouraged to partner with national stakeholders to assist with events, information collection, and product dissemination.

Research Needs of Metropolitan Planning Organizations

Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) have unique needs for new research in planning capacity building. Often, MPOs are not aware of the innovations being done by their peers. NARC encourages more best-practices, case study research into topics such as tolling, intergovernmental coordination, and public education campaigns.

MPOs vary in their level of expertise. Due to staffing issues and budget constraints, many MPOs do not currently possess in-house expertise on important planning issues. As FHWA implements the STEP program, the agency should consider that capacity-building materials are needed at the most basic level. There is a need for events, web-based tutorials, and publications that give an introduction to the field of transportation planning.

MPOs routinely comment that they need more support to improve their expertise in three areas: safety planning, freight/goods movement, and land use and transportation coordination. NARC is pleased that FHWA has listed these three subject areas as STEP Emphasis Areas in the Draft Strategy.

Research Needs of Rural Transportation Planning Organizations

Although Rural Transportation Planning Organizations (RTPOs) are not expressly authorized by Federal legislation, they are an important component of transportation planning in many states.

Safety is a very important issue for RTPOs, since rural roads can be some of the most dangerous due to the presence of wildlife, poor signage, and lack of shoulders or guardrails. NARC would like to see more research into low-cost safety improvements. These inexpensive projects can be implemented by even the smallest of agencies, but are critical to saving lives on the country's rural roads.

Instructions on Matching Funds

The STEP program requires a 50% match from grant recipients. This is a substantial change from the previous method of grant-making. FHWA should develop a brief manual for the organizations that receive STEP funding on how to manage their grants in the manner that FHWA expects.